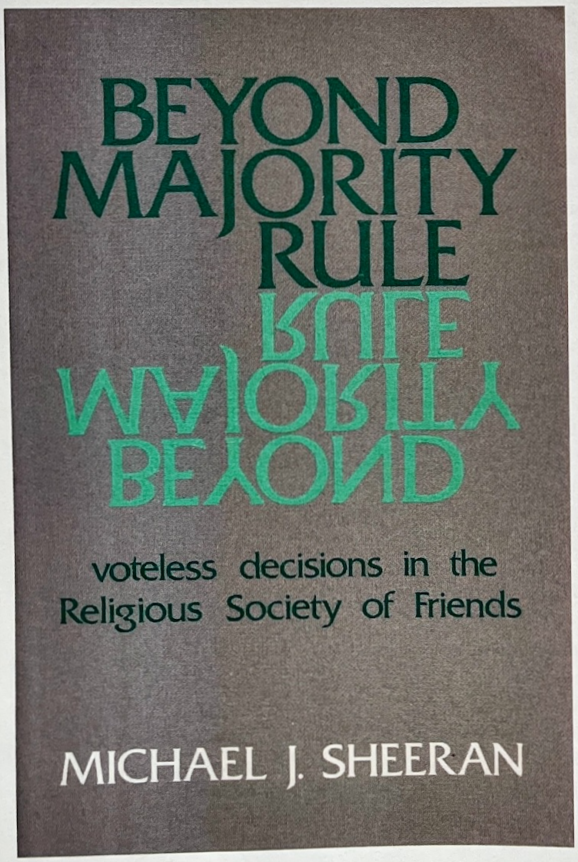
Nudge theory: *Alastair McIntosh* with Michael Sheeran

'Discernment is a process by which God invites us to be co-creators.'



'You must read this!' I was told when I first found Quakers. 'It's about the spiritual basis of our decision-making processes.' Published in 1983, *Beyond Majority Rule* has the subtitle, *Voteless decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*. Reviewers have hailed it as the 'best guide to Quaker decision making available'.

The 1960s counterculture had led many non-profit organisations to seek alternative forms of governance. Authoritarian approaches in the backdrop of two world wars, the cold war and the bomb suggested that we had to look for better ways. True, you could aim to be authoritative without being authoritarian. Yet, by the late 1970s, the record showed that radical alternatives mostly had short half-lives as realities kicked in like 'the tyranny of structurelessness', 'God is never served by inefficiency', and 'Rebels without a clue'. Then, as is often so now, egalitarian and participative governance was easier to dream than to sustain. There had to be a better way. But what?

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church was undergoing its Vatican II reforms. One recommendation was for religious orders to reconnect with their original calling.

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The Jesuits realised that they had lost touch with their roots in communal spiritual discernment. Where might they look to re-learn? Michael Sheeran, then a young Jesuit priest at Princeton University, accordingly undertook his PhD on Quaker decision-making in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

What he discovered was an approach based, when at its best, not on the 'me' of autocratic whim, nor even the 'we' of conventional consensus, but a third way that discerned the leadings, promptings or movement of God's dynamic spirit, as if a hub that gathers many spokes.

He wrote his thesis as *Beyond Majority Rule*. Now in his eighties, I interviewed him for *Friends Journal*. For Michael, discernment is a process by which God invites us to be co-creators, guided by 'inner nudges'. In quiet prayer, individually or collectively, these nudges edge us towards a 'confirmation that springs from the peace of heart'.

Has he any advice to his old friends, the Quakers? He suggested that 'Quakers who feel drawn to the community's conclusion, but who don't recognise God within it' might be missing the deeper gift. After all, what do we mean by being 'gathered in the Light' or 'covered by the Spirit'? Might it be possible that 'the nudges have authority' precisely because they are 'of God's presence', and not necessarily because they are 'comfortable to our community'?

Like early Friends, Jesuits find that 'sufferings' can be contextualised as taking up and sharing in carrying Christ's cross. God's nudges lead us through 'unplannable events and setbacks', and herein lies the strength and privilege of our centuries-old process of communal spiritual discernment. ●

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting. His interview with Michael Sheeran is at www.friendsjournal.org/beyond-majority-rule.